

Dr. S.N. Visvanath



AN ORDINARY LIFE

Preface

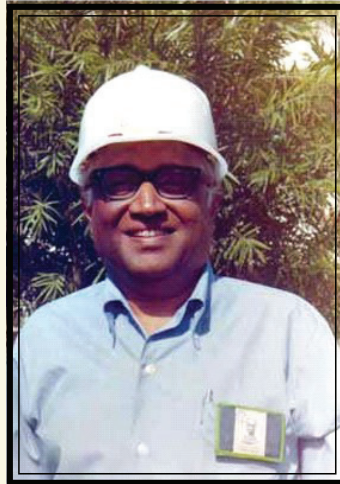
This is a compilation of our dad's few writings that we found after his demise. Our father, Dr. S.N. Visvanath was one of those rare people who had a scientific bent of mind and extraordinary writing and oratory skills. He was academically brilliant and stood first throughout. He was a reputed Geologist and worked in Oil India Limited for over three decades and retired as General Manager (Operations) in 1986.

*Physically he may not be here, but in our hearts, he lives on. He had started writing his autobiography titled **An Ordinary Life**. However, his persona and life were anything but ordinary – it was extraordinary. We have added an Epilogue to his unfinished autobiography and two short articles that he'd written about his experiences as a student in France and the long voyage by ship.*

As he has mentioned in the Prologue, this compilation is meant for his grandchildren, great grandchildren and all those who would like a glimpse into the different phases of his life. If only he had completed his autobiography, it would have been a family treasure. But it was not to be. And here we are compiling the fragments of a luminous life.

This is our tribute to the World's Best Father,

Sharada and Sujata



Dr. S.N. Visvanath

28th Oct. 1928 to 7th Dec. 2010

Prologue:

I start my story at the midnight hour on 25 May 2008 for an audience strictly of the immediate family, more particularly my grandchildren. It is a story with no heroics or melodramatic events or literary flourishes. On the contrary, it is a rather colourless recital of happenings in the life of an upper middle-class Brahmin of Karnataka. I must straightaway confess that I have been a nickel-plated Brahmin. I do not know my community roots, and I have lived in Karnataka only in my twilight years.

The question that arises is why write about an ordinary life? The answer is simple: to preserve whatever remains of my sanity. After 77 years of a good innings, I suffered from kidney failure in end September 2005. This introduced me to an endless cycle of pain and dialysis. While still in this cycle, I received a devastating blow in the early hours of 20 April 2008 that my only son, Shekhar had died of a massive heart attack in distant London. How I held on to sanity is still a mystery. My wife and daughters, themselves consumed by grief, certainly helped me in the recovery process but essentially the battle was mine.

With this awareness, I resolved to carry on by doing what I liked best - writing. And what better than an autobiography which required no research, interviews, library consultation etc. Also, an autobiography was a memory-stretching exercise which kept the mind away from the real and imagined pains of the body. Having thus established the rationale for this writing, I dedicate it to my children and grandchildren.



Dr. S.N. Visvanath

The Beginning

I was born on 28 October 1928 in the elite seaside resort of Waltair, midway between Kolkata and Chennai. You will not find this exotic name on the maps and tourist guides; it has now been given the rather prosaic name of Visakhapatnam or Vizag.

In Waltair, our house was Bungalow No. 4 in Harbour Park. It was on “Badlands” overlooking a wide sweep of the Bay of Bengal. I spent the first ten years in this two-bedroom house. Till about the age of 10 it was a carefree spell in Bungalows 4 and 3. With my elder sister, Lalitha, I spent many happy moments in these houses, interrupted by minor fistfights and dodging in the mini forest of Casuarina trees separating Bungalows 3 and 4, jackals howled through the night here. We never found out where they were during the day!

The sea dominated our lives. We could see it from our terrace. We could hear its music or its roar depending on the climatic changes. On Ganesha immersion days, we were allowed to play in the waves as long as we wanted. Religion in our house was a restrained affair. I only remember Ram Navami, Ganesh Puja and Dussehra. There would be no priest. Anna (my father) conducted the pujas. Caste consciousness was strong especially where scheduled castes were concerned, but there was no overt animosity.

My Illustrious Father

My father, Saligrama Nanjundiah, was an exceptionally brilliant student. Born into poverty, studying by streetlights, doing *vaara* (asking for and invariably getting night food in the house of pious Brahmins), fighting off a cruel stepmother, he took his B.E. degree in 1923 from the hands of no less than Sir M. Visvesvaraya, the Dewan of Mysore and one of the world’s greatest engineers. I think it was the first batch of Engineering students from Mysore University. Seventy years later, my daughter Sujata got her doctorate in biotechnology in the same Crawford Hall of the University.



Interstate moves of officials were rare in those days, but my father decided to accept an assignment at the Calcutta Waterworks Scheme in 1923. Apparently, he did a very good job. A following letter from the Chief Engineer, W.E.Rattenbury, says “it is difficult to imagine such efficiency, such respect for time schedules, such professional integrity from a native.”



Anna

The “native” applied for and was selected for the civil engineering department of the Bengal Nagpur Railway (BNR) in 1925. He showed that his talents were as finely tuned in human relations as in “screwdriver” technology. In early 1927, he was rushed at midnight to quell a riot in the fishing Port of Visakhapatnam, a subsidiary of the BNR, 800 kms away. After three days of negotiation with the fishermen, who had already set fire to one warehouse and were readying for another, peace was restored. On 05.08.1927, Anna took over as temporary in-charge of the Port.

It was during his in-charge period that a breakwater was created to stem the rushing waters of the Bay of Bengal into the channel leading to the area where berths/piers were being built. Basically, the

breakwater was a battle-scarred battleship left over at the end of World War I. This was loaded with huge boulders making it an impregnable fortress. In May 1933 the first ship steamed into the Port and anchored in the piers.

I think I have written too much about Anna but then it was a luminous life unlike mine. Vignettes of his life included: manning the port on the day of the Japanese bombing (April 07, 1942); Rao Bahadur, about the highest honour to an Indian civilian by the British Government (1944); first Indian Administrator of any Port in India (1945) i.e. 2 years before Independence); Visakhapatnam declared as one of the four major ports of India (1957); and, Chairman of the Minor Ports of India (1949-51). Anna retired from Visakhapatnam in August 1958 and returned to his modest house in Bangalore.

Illness dogged him through most of his brief post-retirement years. At 11.40 a.m on 18 December 1958, the door gently closed on his life, uneventful save for its professional integrity, piety, high ideals and dedication. Grief was overwhelming at Visakhapatnam where statues, a hospital and a workman's colony came up in his honour.

We in Bangalore mourned in our own intense way. All of his three children were brought up for the first 20 years of their life in the lap of luxury and carefreeness. Whether this was a blessing or a handicap, time alone would tell. As far as I am concerned, I consider it a handicap.



My Gentle Mother



Amma

My recollections of Amma (Sarada) are vague. She was a low-voiced kindly woman, who told me stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, played the violin gracefully as any serious student of Dwaram Venkatswamy Naidu, the greatest violinist of that era, and was regular with prayers. She was born into an opulent family, but she retained simplicity throughout life. Her father, Sitaramiah (known to us as Seethanna) was Chief Engineer of the Mysore State Electricity Board and was part of the team that brought electricity to Bangalore for the first time in India in 1906.

In 1939, Amma was stricken with typhoid along with me. The attack was milder than mine, but its long-term effects were devastating. Throughout the 40s she must have had six or seven heart attacks and always seemed to be in much pain. One major heart attack was in 1946. That very day, Anna and I were scheduled to go for the launching of *Jalausha*, the first Indian-built ship at Hindustan Shipyards Limited by Shri Walchand Hirachand. As Administrator of the Port, Anna had to

attend the ceremony, so the toss-up was between Lalitha and myself as to who would stay back with Amma. I did.

My absences from home: Loyola College, Mackhund, Kolar Gold Fields did not improve matters regarding her health. When I left for France, I had the feeling, and so did she, that we would never see each other again. We were both wrong. With an obstinacy that amazed doctors, she clung to life till I returned from France, listened to all that I had to say, and expired on 16 July 1955 when I had gone out on a geological excursion. A truly gentle soul, never on the warpath or the loud word, had drifted into infinity at the young age of 45. Thus, from both sides I inherited a legacy of calmness, composure and economy of speech.



*Amma with her brother
Seshadri*

The Growing up Years

I grew up in a huge house with two servants at my beck and call. I never learnt self-reliance. I never knew how to polish my shoes or keep my room clean or even boil water! To a great degree these were taken care of in my subsequent tenures in France, Rourkela and Assam.

One of my classmates in Waltair, Benjamin, looked after his fatherless family of four, and did odd jobs by way of earning. It was a house of much poverty. Benjamin was also a good student and did very well in Senior Cambridge. He supported one sister in school and managed a scholarship for another. Despite these travails he was always happy and smiling. For some mysterious reason, I envied Benjamin. Perhaps it was the cheerful way in which he denied himself the normal pleasures of boyhood: cricket, football, cinema etc. and opted for a life of sacrifice. Such are saints made of. I might have had a rich living but he had a rich life. He rose to a high position in the Hyderabad Transport Corporation and, ironically, died in a road accident.

Personal relations with my father were generally on the cordial side though I did receive a few thrashings for assorted crimes ranging from beating up a fellow student, running up HMS Bakery bills, sea-bathing with friends without permission and safeguards etc. Significantly, school reports did not create any adverse reaction although the performance was mediocre up to 3rd standard. Perhaps he guessed that I would do better in subsequent classes.

He was right but not in the way things turned out. I think it was the typhoid which kept me in bed for 90 days of which 21 in a coma towards end 1939. The illness apparently changed some wiring in my brain. Almost overnight, mediocrity transformed to brilliance. From 5th standard to Senior Cambridge, which I reached in 1944, I stood uniformly first whether it be in quarterly, semi-final or final exams.

The World War Years

There were two significant events in 1942. My sister Lalitha was married to her maternal uncle Seshadri. Such consanguineous marriages were common in those days, though personally I was confused whether Seshadri was my uncle or brother-in-law. The marriage was held at No.3 Harbour Park under very heavy lighting restrictions owing to the Air Raid Precaution rules of World War II. Tents were pitched in the vast vacant land of the house to accommodate the many who came from Calcutta or Bangalore.

The second event was the bombing of Visakhapatnam by the Japanese in the Second World War. Most families had already shifted but this accelerated when the attack took place on 07 April 1942. Amma, my sisters and I moved to Bangalore but Krishnamurthy, the cook, loyally stood by my father. The house was entirely in his command, and he took very great care of it. Anna was made Major and later Lt. Colonel in charge of the Port towards the end of the war years.

Krishnamurthy may have been our cook but in my parents' eyes he represented a superior servant. He was a Tamil Brahmin, knowledgeable in the Vedas from which he would recite and translate verses. He was a central figure on festive occasions, and we had to do *namaskara* to him along with the elders.

In December 1943, a one-seater fighter aircraft crashed into the badlands that separated the house from the sea. Remarkably, the aircraft did not catch fire. Remarkably also, the pilot's injuries though severe were not life-threatening. Some of the pedestrians brought him to our house while Lalitha phoned up the Chief Surgeon of King George Hospital, M.G.Kini. He rushed in, had a preliminary look, and admitted him to the Hospital. The pilot's identity card showed that he was D. Mazumdar, 26 years, living in 1, Robinson Street, Calcutta-1. I phoned up the number given in the card, conveyed the news and told them that he was injured but recovering.

Two days later the Mazumdars arrived in Waltair by train. After settling down in our house, they went to the hospital and returned with a vast sense of relief. This was the beginning of a life-long friendship, especially between Amma and Mrs. Mazumdar. They were an aristocratic and distinguished family. Mr. Mazumdar was the Chief Justice of the High Court of the then undivided Bengal, and she was a famous social worker in the field of women empowerment and had written many books, the most notable being the *Ramayana*. Talking with them was an educational experience in itself: the fine language, the polished accents, the grace of easy flowing words, the depth of knowledge. Mrs. Mazumdar's speciality was in the field of women in prison. Mr. Mazumdar died in 1955 and after 40 years of widowhood his wife died in 1995. Death snapped our links with a most distinguished family.

My College Years

Coming back to my recital, with my marks and “Jesuit” background, it was a cakewalk to Loyola College at Madras for what was then called the intermediate. For a change, Anna’s name played no role in my admission. Intermediate was a two-year course preparatory to B.A. or B.Sc.

The discipline in Loyola was extremely strict and that perhaps explains why we were the undisputed top college of Madras Presidency. Our Principal was Jerome D’Souza who later became one of the Indian delegates to the U.N. The students of each college in Madras had an epithet. Thus, there were the crooks of Pachiappas, the aristocrats of Presidency, the snobs of Christian. We were the slaves of Loyola. We had our own motto and song.

In my two years at Loyola (1945-47), I learnt tennis. The coach, Vishnu Mohan, was a very nice man and he painstakingly taught a few of us the grace of the game. Another coach, G.L. Narayan, was a growling, abusive type. The growl eventually went off to Rishi Valley School about 150 kms northeast of Bangalore. At College, I also fractured my ankle on the stairs and wrote some of my final exam papers in the General Hospital, Chennai. Despite the pain and environment, I scored very well and passed with a First Class. At the Golden Jubilee celebrations of Loyola, I received the Leigh Gold Medal for University 1st in English from Sir Archibald Nye, Governor of Madras in end 1947.

For five long months in 1948 in Waltair, I just read poetry and classics, took walks of 7 to 8 kilometres, and played tennis with Bayankar, one of the Port officers. Thanks to Wankawala, I got a ship trip from Vizag to Calcutta. It was lovely. At Calcutta I stayed with one Thandaveswara. After a couple of boring days listening to long verses from the Upanishads, I fled by train to Waltair.

I then decided to have some education! If Loyola was a cakewalk, the Geology Department of Andhra University was a chocolate-cakewalk, with the Vice-chancellor, Dr.C.R. Reddy, personally piloting my application for B.Sc Honours in Geology.

Regret and Guilt

History is replete with sons looking after parents in their old age. I was a melancholy exception. I did not contribute a single rupee towards the upkeep of my parents. When I was in Kolar, Anna would be sending me (probably at the urging of Amma) Rs.100/- additional to what I was getting monthly from the Department. When I was in France on a handsome French Government scholarship, I got one lumpsum of 30,000 old francs (about Rs.5000/-) by way of travellers' cheques from Anna. When I joined Hindustan Steel Company in 1956 at a salary of Rs.400/- I still got Rs.200/ from Waltair. It was only after I joined the Assam Oil Company Limited in 1957 that the donations stopped.

However, there was one exception. When Anna visited Digboi later in the year, he discovered (I do not know how!) that I had an outstanding debt of Rs.1400/- to an expatriate colleague for purchase of his tape-recorder. Anna spontaneously made out a cheque for this amount and the matter was settled with a sense of shame. This zero-contribution to the welfare of my parents has left me with a sense of melancholy that still persists.

On retirement Anna got an impressive provident fund. There was also a readymade house built by him in Bangalore. Retirement obviously did not bring him poverty. This comes home more acutely to me as I write these lines when my two daughters and my son Shekhar (during his brief lifetime) so lovingly and discreetly take care of my wife and me.



Sujata at the Department of Geology, Waltair

Going Back in Time

In defiance of chronology, we step back to 1937. Two images stand out. The first is of my father weeping with a telegram in his hand. The news was that Chowdiah, Anna's protector and saviour in the early years, had died of tuberculosis, at that time a fatal disease. Till then, I never knew that adult men could weep. That very evening, Anna set out for Bangalore. Amma and I went with him to the station. A first-class pass was hurriedly made out for him and he started on the journey.

The second image was also a railway journey but this time at the beginning of a joyous vacation to Calcutta. What impressed me first were the trappings of a saloon car. More impressive was the flickering of stray village lights as the Madras-Waltair Howrah Mail screamed its way through the velvety darkness of the Andhra night. I remember having first dwelt on and then slept off on this scene. The image stilled to a railway station with all mankind briskly stirring about and taking over the screaming duties from the Mail. We reached Howrah in the afternoon, crossed the Hoogly by a BNR boat (the spectacular Howrah Bridge was ready but not open for traffic) and landed in Calcutta.

We stayed in the huge 3rd floor flat of B.V.Ramiah whose wife Gangamma was Anna's aunt. Unlike her husband, Gangamma was rather modern. Her passion was tea and scones at Flury's and horse-racing. They had three children: Srinivas, a moron about 17 years old, Sharada, 13, an introvert but pleasant, and Lalitha, 10, who was the brightest of the lot. She played many indoor games with us and cheerfully accompanied us in our outdoor visits. We visited many places in the huge Dodge car of Ramiah, but I remember only two: Victoria Memorial and Belur Temple. After a couple of weeks we returned to Waltair. To give a sense of completion to the Calcutta story, Lalitha was married outside the tribe to Vittal Mallya (father of Vijay Mallya).

We started 1938 with a 60-km trip in our Austin-14 to Vizianagaram where the play "Abhimanyu" was being staged by the reputed Gubbi Veeranna troupe of Mysore. It was a mindboggling spectacle of sound and light and I was thrilled to the bone. Not so the three or four women in front of me. They were sobbing as Abhimanyu was killed. Anna met some of the team backstage and to their great happiness spoke to them in Kannada.

Summer Holidays

During summer holidays we went to Bangalore. Amma, Lalitha and Krishnamurthy (our faithful cook) went by train and Anna, driver Dhanayya and myself by car up to Madras. Thereafter, Lalitha and I exchanged places. Within Andhra the roads were awful, but they improved as we neared our destination. Being “mummy’s boy,” I frequently asked why Amma did not travel with us in the car. No reply. We reached Bangalore, spent 3 weeks in glorious weather. In mid-April we returned to Waltair.



Sujata at No. 3 Harbour Park



With Pramila at Nahor, Yelahanka

The reply to my query regarding Amma came on the 26th of October 1938 when Pramila was born. She was born in Bungalow No.4. Her birth coincided with a significant promotion that Anna got and with our move to the most prestigious Bungalow No.3. Apart from the typhoid attack mentioned earlier, Amma’s health improved in the 1939-1947 period. All this was attributed, and rightly so, to the arrival of Pramila.

With a 10-year age difference between Pramila and myself, there was no question of sharing of toys, quarrels or jealousies. The main handicap of this difference was that we grew up in different worlds. While she was passing from childhood to girlhood to womanhood, I was in Madras, Kolar, France, Rourkela. There was no common ground for serious talk.

Furthermore, like me but unlike Lalitha, Pramila was of the quiet type. As far as I recollect she had only four authentic friends: Surabhi and Nilima, daughters of H. Wankawala, Managing Director of Hindustan Shipyards and Sara, daughter of P.M. Chengappa, Chief Engineer Electrical, Madras Government.

I mention these names because they had some impact on my life. Wankawala's Certificate to the French Consulate regarding my fitness for scholarship studies in France made me out to be slightly better than Einstein. Mrs. Wankawala, good soul, was the first Indian urban, high-society woman I saw smoking in public.

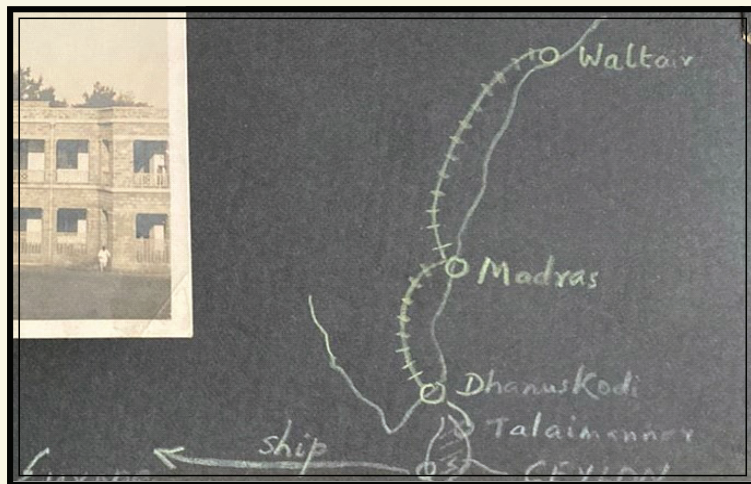
Sara moved into our house in 1951, consequent on the transfer of her father to the Machkund Hydroelectric Scheme on the Andhra-Orissa border. She was in the same class and school as Pramila. In a way, Chengappa's transfer was a boon to me since I had a house to stay (instead of a tent) while preparing my secondary paper on Machkund geology. The friendship of the Chengappa family has been maintained through his daughter Kaveri and Belliappa. It is a 60-year friendship which I will always cherish.

My first step towards "advertising" my work was in 1951 when my work on "The underground geology of the Nandidurg Mines of the Kolar Gold Fields," was published. The chief of this section, Suri Subramaniam was a kindly, yet very disciplined and efficient officer. He had to be, for the earth does not tolerate any mistakes made by 10-12 men at a depth of 2500-3000 metres. Rock bursts were fairly common and the miners could be trapped with only a 20 percent chance of rescue or survival. Interestingly, 95 percent of the miners were Tamilian. The friendship of the Suri family, carried coincidentally also through Sharada and Nirmala, has been one of the bright spots of my life.

Barring the three or four years in Andhra University, my education from Nursery to D.Sc was in Jesuit institutions: St.Aloysius High School, Loyola College and, in France, the School of Applied Geology. The French influence was extremely strong in all these centres and I was invariably drawn to the melody of the language.

France Beckons!

It was, therefore, not surprising, that when a French Government scholarship for higher studies in France appeared in the papers in 1951, I immediately applied with the full approval of Anna and the full disapproval of Amma. Anna won. So once again I was on the train to Calcutta, this time alone. And this time by car over Howrah Bridge. The destination was the French Consulate in Park Street where speaking and written tests were programmed.



Route from Waltair to France

There were only 9 candidates. Again, not surprising. Terrorised by the linguistic barrier, hordes of students gravitated towards the English-speaking countries, but I was different. I wanted to find out what the Continent, which had gifted the world with some of the finest geologists had to offer by way of a liberal education. Four of us were selected in the different disciplines. Three of them were assigned to Paris where, in those days, only one out of fifty Frenchmen knew English. I was nominated to the School of Applied Geology at Nancy, 300 kms east of Paris, where English was as popular as Oriya.

Procedural formalities for departure began at Waltair. Here again, my individuality was snubbed. At the Passport office, I

was sitting on a bench at the end of a long queue of candidates, mostly tradesmen/workers for southeast Asia. A familiar face in grey suit walked past and fleetingly our eyes met. In fifteen minutes, the grey suit walked out. Ten minutes later, a clerk emerged from the Office and loudly asked for Nanjundiah's son. I walked past sullen faces, filled in some forms and quickly walked out. Obviously, grey suit had intervened. About a week later, the passport arrived. For the visa, I had to go to the Consulate at Madras since I was from the South Zone.

After studying various schedules of travel so as to be in Nancy on time, I selected the steamship *Orcades* of the French Agency *Les Messageries Maritimes*. The route of the ship was Sydney – Saigon – Colombo – Aden – Port Said - Naples – Marseilles. For me, the best choice was to join the ship at Colombo. The cost of a first-class Colombo-Marseilles ticket was Rs.12,000/. A BNR clerk accompanied me to ensure that there was no problem at Talaimannar, the entry port-cum-railway station of Ceylon.

And so, on 09 June 1952, all came to see me off at Waltair Railway Station. All except Amma on Doctor's orders. I set forth on the Madras Mail to Madras Central, changed over to Madras Egmore and took the Boat Mail to Ceylon. Thanks to a three-hour halt at Dhanushkodi for document examination, I could fulfil one of Amma's ardent wishes, namely, that I should have a bath in the sea there. It seems Sri Rama bathed and prayed at Dhanuskodi before launching the all-out attack on Ravana.

The sea voyage and stay in France is described in the Appendices.

Nancy University

As mentioned earlier, English was unknown in Nancy. I wonder if the Professor of English at the University knew the language. The most popular newspaper of the region reported *Aujourd'hui un hindou est arrive a Nancy por faire des etudes a l'Ecole de Geologie Appliquee*. In those days Indian meant Red Indian of America while Hindu was reserved for those from India. Thus, Abdul the Hindu was not surprising.

Within a month of my arrival in Nancy, I went for my field work in the Pyrenees. My assignment for the D.Sc was to map and analyze the prospects of the area within and around a zinc-and lead mine of the *Compagnie Royale Asturienne des Mines de Sentein en Ariege*. The Mines were situated at an altitude of 2200-3500 metres and were snow blocked during four months of the year. Mining work was tough. Once a week we were given off and once a month we could go down the Valley of the *Lez* to the town of St. Girons.



Sujata at 94, Ecole Nationale des Sciences Géographiques

I regularly visited the library of the University of Toulouse, about 80 kms from Sentein. There I met some students from Pondicherry. Although they had lived in France for decades, they could not get rid of the *vango-pongo* dialect. I was dismayed by the massacre of the world's most beautiful language. However, when it came to writing my thesis, I received minor help for grammar and tense from them.

For purposes of easy access, I always kept my passport and work-notes in a suitcase in the cupboard. This proved to be a blessing without disguise. On the night of 22 June 1953, a fire broke out in the block where I was living. I seized the suitcase and jumped out in my pyjamas. The jump was no great feat because there was a lot of snow. There were no deaths nor do I recollect any major injuries. Many lost their belongings, but they were covered by social security, I was not.

With much hesitation, I wrote to the Director of the *Ecole* at Nancy if I could borrow 15,000 francs for urgent clothing and other material and that I would return it as soon as my scholarship money arrived. In response, I received 25,000 francs with a note saying that I need not return it. At about the same time, a representative of the Company arrived from Paris and distributed money to the workers. I mention this because 12 of the workers knowing that I was not covered by social security joined hands and gave me 40,000 francs. The fire had enriched me!

In 1953, M.B. Ramachandra Rao (MBR) and his wife Sarada (Ayi) visited France for about three days. The objective was discussions with the *Compagnie Generale de Geophysique*. Naturally, I was asked to join in. Over the next two days I kept their company for a few hours and saw them off at Strasbourg for Berlin. At that point of time we never knew that we would be united by marriage.



Place Stanislas- a popular place in Nancy

Amma had sent a bottle of pickle for me through MBR. Forgotten in Paris, it lay at the bottom of a suitcase which was in the not-to-be-opened category till Berlin. MBR promised to give it on the return journey but alas they took the train to Rome via Stuttgart and not Strasbourg where I waited for about a couple of hours, then had a bottle of beer and went back to Nancy. The topic was not raised when we met in India. More importantly, it was not raised by Amma for then I would have to tell a lie that the pickles were excellent.

My Snowy Experiences in France

There is so much to write about my French experience – the rail journeys, the places that I visited, skiing in the Alps, boating in Lake Annecy, mountain climbing in the Juras, long treks in the Vosges, art museums and wonderful people: that I do not know where to start. So, I will not start. I will just write about snow.

In my boyhood days the most famous facial cream was Afghan Snow (alas it must now be red with five years of continuous war). Here, in France, I saw snow from the skies in pure white. On two occasions, this pure white thing nearly killed me.

The first was a major avalanche which swept three villages off the map in a place called Luchon. I was mapping in the vicinity and heard a loud sound of about 20 canons firing simultaneously I ran for my life for about 20 minutes with only snow gently hitting my knees, then my ankles. Later, I was told that I was on the fringe of the avalanche whose central axis was about 5 kms away.

The second also was in the Pyrenees, but this time in the high mountains where I was trapped with a colleague, Michel Clin, in a region of high wind and unstoppable snow. Getting caught here was entirely our fault. Working on the rocks, time gently passed by and a stealthily advancing fog enveloped us. Hit by tiny fragments of snow, unnerved by the dismal howl of the snowstorm.

We clung to each other, but a glove escaped from Clin's hand and we were separated. I remember clutching his snow boots. For a change it hung on to its owner till I could secure a more reliable rock anchor. There was no question of sleep

that night, only a mild feeling of terror. Nothing came and, in the morning, a rescue party from the valley eventually rescued us with much scolding and a cup of hot *chocolat*.



Snow hiking in the Pyrenees

The third was while I was enroute to Nancy where I saw snow for the first time. I was in the middle of the road watching snowflakes coming down to me from a moonlit sky. A car screamed close to me and stopped. I braced myself for a torrent of abuse, and perhaps beating, as the driver got out. There was anger alright, but it seemed to be coated with elegance. I explained that I was seeing snow for the first time and was in a trance. He got back to his car, closed the door, opened the door, stepped out and asked from which part of Algeria I came. I replied that I was from India. The 220-volt shock was apparent. As the snowfall increased, he hurried me into his car and took me to his house. I was deeply worried whether I was being kidnapped. I got the answer ten minutes later.

While entering the house, I noted the Board: *Prof. Jacques Benoit, Professeur a l'Institut de la civilisation indienne*. The reason for the abrupt change from frosty cold to a warm reception became clear. Over sparkling Alsace wine, we spoke on many topics.

We spoke about India where he had spent five years, written a travel book about the country, loved its people etc. His wife joined us at this juncture. She was a Romanian and her English was most attractive as she spoke about “her India.” After a simple meal, Jacques dropped me back at my hostel. Snow had brought us together after nearly killing me. We kept in contact with each other. In 1954, Jacques died of cancer.

These were the three occasions when snow played a significant part of my stay in France. I still have a horror of ice unless it comes tinkling as a cube in appropriate drinks at sunset.

Defending my Thesis

After three years of field and laboratory work in the Pyrenees I was ready with my thesis *Etude geologique de la region Miniere de Sentein*. I had developed thinking in French but to give my writing a smoothness, I enlisted my colleague, Michel Clin. Through long hours of the night we spent polishing up my writing to make it more convincing. Coincidentally, he was doing field geology in an adjacent area of the Pyrenees.

You cannot just give your thesis and get away. A 4-man team headed by my professor and three geoscientists from Britain, Germany and Spain would listen to my presentation and decide whether I was worthy of a doctorate.

At 15.30 p.m. on May 5th, 1955, I made my presentation before four of Europe's eminent geoscientists. I started off with extreme nervousness not knowing which way the wind would blow. My French was good and the documents and photo-slides impeccable. I ended at 17.30, quite exhausted. A barrage of questions followed which I fielded easily at the



Michel Clin

end of which the jury marched out to arrive at a decision. Needless to say, I was on tenterhooks till they marched in and announced:

Monsieur Saligrama Visvanath, apres avoir lu votre these intitule "Etude geologique de la region miniere de Sentein et apres avoir ecouter a sa soutenance, le jury est arrivee a la conclusion unanime de vous decerner le diplome de Doctorat de L'Universite de Nancy mention science avec le mention tres honorable. En vue de la qualite exceptionnelle de votre these, le jury vous offrir ces felicitations les plus chaleureuses."

The last sentence is the highest honour that France could bestow on a doctorate in any discipline. It says that "in view of the exceptional quality of your thesis, the jury offers you its congratulations." A strange but welcome procedure. Surely in High Courts the jury does not congratulate the lawyer or the accused. They just walk out.

In my case, they just walked in for the mandatory champagne party which the victor had to give to about 20 people. I saw the row of bottles and delicious snacks. My first reaction was of shock. I grew pale at the thought as to how I could



meet the bill with my scholarship amount. Perhaps the paleness showed on my face because a hand gently descended on my shoulder and whispered, "Don't worry. Everything has been paid for." The hand and voice were those of Mlle Gaboury, the School Secretary. It had to be, because she was the self-appointed mother of all the boys and girls of the School. The party ended when the bottles ended. I went home in a euphoria and had the finest sleep since my babyhood. As an expression of gratitude, I gifted Mlle Gaboury an Indian scarf which Amma had sent me.

Next morning, after convincing the postmistress at Nancy Cedex that a place called Visakhapatnam existed in India, I sent Anna a telegram saying "Obtained doctorate in first class. Sailing 21st from Genoa after completing a few formalities at Paris and Sentein." Anna later told me that he had a throbbing in his right shoulder that morning, indicative of good news.

The next day I received a call from the *Compagnie Royale Asturienne des Mines de Sentein* asking me to meet their Managing Director, Mr. Blanchard, in Paris. A colleague of

mine was travelling by car the very next day from Nancy to Paris, and so I got a free ride.

Mr. Blanchard proved to be a very friendly man. He and his technical director spent about an hour with me going over various points of my geological analysis of the Sentein Mining Lease areas. We had a working lunch and I made the pleasant discovery that Mr. Blanchard was a strict vegetarian, something rather rare in the France of the 50s. At the end of the lunch, another surprise awaited me. Mr Blanchard pulled out a white envelope from his pocket. This contained a cheque for 200,000 francs (Rs.32,000/-in those days) and a letter of appreciation.

While deeply grateful for this gesture, I was also apprehensive. I was a Government of France scholar and was expected to live on the scholarship only. Would there be any problem in accepting this money? That very night I phoned up Prof. Roubault in Nancy to ask his advice. Loosely translated what he said was "don't be stupid, take the cheque." I wonder

if the French Income-tax Authority will wake up to this cheque issued 55 years ago. If they did, they would, more likely, reward me with a bottle of champagne for having kept it a secret for so long!

With this windfall, I arranged a European grand tour by train for 75,000 francs through Thomas Cook and Sons, the most reputed travel agents of that era. My visa was only for Western Europe which meant not for areas in the Soviet sphere of influence. Thus, the route was Strasbourg-Brussels-West Berlin-Innsbruck-Berne-Zurich-Rome-Paris. I stayed in youth hostels. The entire journey took 25 days. Each place was a jewel in the necklace of beauty.

But as Kahlil Gibran said:

Not forever does the bulbul sing,

Not forever lasts the spring.

The time had come to close the most beautiful moments of my student career.

On return to Paris, I picked up my study certificates, my heavy thesis, my train ticket from Paris to Genoa and my ship ticket from Genoa to Bombay. Some friends had come to see me off at *Gare de l'est* on 18 June 1955. It was quite an emotional parting.

Sojourn in France Ends

On 25 June 1955, I set sail from Genoa by *S.S. Galileo* of the *Lloyd Triestino* Group. It was not half as pleasant as the onward journey. One incident, however, is worth mentioning. Every evening on the ship, there would be a cultural programme and that day it was Greek dances. I strolled casually to my table but found it missing. The stroll continued and I discovered the table but it was in the front row and elegantly decorated. The name plate, however, was both bold and clear: S.N. VISVANATH.

I had barely seated for five minutes, when a distraught Italian waiter came running with the usual Latin emotion of gesticulations, saying that he would lose his job, he had a wife and five children and recited the usual woes of all those who are fired. When he calmed down, he said he had made a mistake of placing the table in the wrong corner with the wrong nameplate. Could I please forgive this error and move to my *real* table. I readily agreed because I too was uncomfortable that something was wrong. The waiter's relief was overwhelming as he led me through the crowd to a table which was one quarter the size of the earlier one. The husband-wife team which took over the grand table were deeply apologetic at this turn of events, and we separated after mutual expressions of goodwill and authentic smiles. And so I thought the story ended.

The next day, after shipboard exercises I was sipping orange squash in a deck-chair, when the elderly couple of the day before drew up two deck-chairs and we started chatting on a variety of subjects. I felt completely at ease and we spoke like long-lost friends. At this stage a waiter came to say that Sir Edward Appleton was wanted on the phone. I felt sick and knocked out.

Sir Edward Appleton was one of the greatest scientists of his age. His contributions to geophysics are legion. He discovered a layer in the ionosphere, the radio-wave reflecting layer. He won the Noble Prize for physics in 1936. And here I was chatting away with him as though we were great chums.

Next day, I took a book as a pretence to read. But I could not wipe out that subdued look created by yesterday's drama. In such matters, women are more sensitive than men. Within two minutes of sitting down, she asked me "You look a bit

pale. Are you alright? I have some sea-sickness tablets if you want.” At this stage, I gave up and told the truth, at the end of which we all had a laugh. At that evening’s cultural show, they invited me to their table. It was the most delightful evening of my voyage.

Next day, the Appletons disembarked at Karachi where Sir Edward had to open a science congress. The next day, I was in Bombay. At Ballard Pier, I was received by my maternal uncles, Murthy and Gopal and Gopal’s wife, Ruth, a pretty Anglo-Indian girl. Gopal and Ruth were excommunicated from the mainstream family but they always found a warm and loving welcome in No.3 Harbour Park. My train journey to Waltair was uneventful. I was received at the station royally. I had left as a Mr no-body but returned as a Dr. some-body.

Amma did not come to the station to receive me. She saw me in the veranda of our house, muttered something and fainted. After a few minutes she recovered sufficiently to talk to me. She was in bad shape and doctors wondered how she clung on to life. It was not a long one. As mentioned earlier, she died at the young age of 45 on 16 July 1955.

An eerie silence descended on a home that was generally silent. The faithful Krishnamurthy kept the wheels of daily life moving. Over the next six months, I resumed my beach walks up to a prominent seaside feature called Lawsons Bay. It was back to poetry and classics. Back also to discreet donations from Anna.

My Working Life Begins

In December 1955, I applied for and got a job at Hindustan Steel Limited, Rourkela at a salary of Rs.300/- more than others of the exploration department. because of my doctorate. This created a storm situation but everyone knew that it was a management decision, and not of my seeking. In fact, they learnt some helpful hints on section drawing, sonic booms etc. For the first month, I stayed in the house of Appu, a senior manager of HSL and an old family friend. Later I moved to a tent in Birmitrapur, 15 kms from Rourkela.

Birmitrapur was in limestone country and plenty of quality limestone was required for steel manufacture. The tribes were very friendly despite the language barrier. Their dances had a monotonous though exotic sway. My duty was to ensure the supply of quality limestone to Rourkela. Nothing very intellectual. Nothing very dramatic. Only two events stand out in my memory. One was that for the first time in 27 years, I was shouted at. The second was that the shouter was Thirumala Iyengar (TI), CEO of HSL.

While I was on my way for lunch one day, my boss, Mr. Lall, gave me a closed envelope to hand over to TI or his secretary. The Secretary was not there, so I knocked the door and went in. TI glared at me and took the envelope. Five minutes later, the tsunami came. "Your Lall is a crook and he runs a department of crooks. What did he do with my tractor, with my steel tape, with my theodolite? All returned well past the promised due date and in damaged condition. And now he has the nerve to ask me for binoculars. He is short-sighted and let him remain short-sighted. By the way, who are you?"

"I am in the Birmitrapur Division of the Geological Department Sir." By this time, he must have realized that I was an innocent postman because his voice and mood softened. He said, "Okay, I will deal with this." I staggered out into the lounge and sat down. The Secretary had come back and I asked her for a glass of water lest I faint. Unlike her boss, she was human. The tall glass duly arrived and I was truly grateful.

With appetite gone, I staggered back to the office with a sandwich and indulged in self-pity till closing time. That evening, I told Appu about the incident. Appu was surprised. He said if it was official work, TI would blow up for five

minutes and then calm down to extreme niceness. With friends he was the very epitome of courtesy and bonhomie. I did not bother for other details. The incident only enhanced my desire to leave HSL and its strange MD.

A few months later, there was a retirement farewell party for TI. Some were genuinely sorry, others were pseudo-sad while I was positively happy. There was the usual sterile gossip with no definite beginning and no sign of an end. At this point, TI walked across the hall to me and said “Appu tells me that you are Nanjundiah’s son. We are very good friends for 40 years. My wife and I came to Waltair in 1936 and stayed for two weeks to watch the sea-pier construction. You must come and visit us before we leave.”

Not a word about our painful interview. Not an apology. I made some vague noises which could mean either yes or no. It was sad to realize that the friend of the father was the enemy of the son. Later I learnt that TI was one of the world’s great engineers, having built the world’s longest earthen bridge at Hirakud. This, however, did not justify humiliation of one lower down the ladder.

During my meditative moments in Birmitrapur, my thoughts went back to a Burmah Oil Company executive, Middleton, who had come to the *Ecole* for some research. He had told me about a Burmah subsidiary called Assam Oil Company Ltd.

This total recall prompted me to resign from HSL in July 1956. I got back to Waltair to see Anna and generally relax. Not quite. The lecturer in French of Andhra University had a severe heart attack and I was asked to step in for a couple of months. My monthly salary of Rs.100/-p.m was given away to the teaboys.

Wedding Preparations

During my innings in France, Lalitha told me that many “candidate” brides had been lined up for selection by Amma! This was a good decision because Anna was more or less indifferent and secondly because it would give a sense of power and importance to my dying mother. My principal information in such matters was Lalitha.

One candidate was from Y. Nagappa of Assam Oil Company Ltd, Digboi proposing one of his daughters, but it did not materialize. The second, Padma Venkatraman also failed because the family had a history of mental problems. The third one, also a Padma, was from a good and friendly family but she was rejected because she was scheduled caste. Amma's conditions for the prospective bride: she had to be Brahmin, vegetarian, good in music, and a graduate. The girl who finally became my wife, Usha, met the first two conditions. She, and indeed all her family, were totally alien to music and the fine arts.

The family including Usha, comprised 6 adults. They all lived in a tenement in Dadar, a suburb of Bombay. The father, M.B. Nanjappa, was in the Commercial Department of the Railways. The contact with the family was made via MBR. How we developed it was as follows.

Vizag did not have any respectable hotels at that time; also, the University guesthouse was not yet ready. It was, therefore, not surprising that Dr. C.R. Reddy, Vice-chancellor, should bring MBR to our house for a decent accommodation and thereby save the *izzat* of the University. A new camaraderie developed between my father and MBR.

My meetings with MBR in 1951-1952 were brief because we had our own, unrelated, time-bound assignments. His was research work in the Ganacharpur graphite area, 2 miles north of the Kolar Gold Fields (KGF) while I was in the Nandidurg Mines of the KGF.

Thus, MBR came into the lives of Anna and myself at the end of the 40s. He must have met my mother also, otherwise the pickle tragedy would not have been enacted at Strasbourg. The bride's team on the pre-marriage discussions was led by MBR, which we thought was rather strange since the bride's father was alive and well and should have played this role. Perhaps he was bored by the proceedings. Usha's mother was more explicit. Even a month before the marriage, she called me a "blackie." This I thought was a strange prelude to a marriage.

Slight Misunderstanding

On our side, things moved evenly since both Anna and myself were the only two we were on the same wavelength on all matters. While in this relaxed state, a *tsunami* hit us. The marriage invitation card was printed in my father's name

which, strictly speaking, was not done, since he was a widower. In the Hindu way of life, it should have been in the name of the oldest living couple in the family, my father's younger brother, S.R.Rao, and his wife Puttu. My uncle was a quiet, decent man who understood that mistakes do happen. But not Puttu. She went into a rage, said that the lapse was planned and that we were out to humiliate her and so on and so forth. To smoothen matters, Anna and myself went to Puttu's house in Sion. While my uncle sought to downplay the issue, Puttu went into a frenzy, saying that it was all a conspiracy to keep her out of the picture. The invitation should have been in her name and that of her husband, and not that of a man who happened to be the father of the bridegroom. When things really hotted up, I pulled Anna by the coat and we made our way out without even a goodnight.

We headed to Chembur and caught Murthy just as he was going to bed. In total contrast to Rao, he readily agreed to preside with his wife over my wedding, gave instructions regarding his camera shop and general instructions regarding the house. He was in the marriage hall ten minutes before the start of proceedings. Usha and I were married at the Bhagini Samaj in Dadar on 22 December 1956. Priests imported from Karnataka did the usual rituals. The hall had been decorated and a few chairs and tables laid out for the mandatory post-marriage reception. Familiar faces were my five maternal uncles and aunts. Almost everyone else was new. Not surprising since Bombay itself was new.



Wedding: December 22nd, 1956



Reception at Waltair Club, with Seethamma, SR Rao, Anna, Pramila and Lalitha

After the Wedding and on to Digboi

After another round of visits in Bombay, MBR and wife and Usha and myself left for Calcutta. In succeeding days we took a tour of the city, including the temple town of Belur, and ended up with a film show in Tiger Cinema. The show, “A million-pound Note” starring Gregory Peck, has been the finest we have ever seen. Recent (2009) efforts to get a copy from Hollywood via a friend have failed.

A few days later, Usha left for Waltair. On January 14, 1957, when the rest of India was in the festive mood of Pongal, or, Sankranti, or Lodhi, I was at Calcutta airport in blinding rain for take-off to Assam (Digboi) which was my next career-step

after Rourkela. An ancient, but valiant, Dakota possibly held together by scotch tape and goodwill took us across a rock-and - roll over Shillong Peak and through 7 airports before landing at Mohanbari airport.

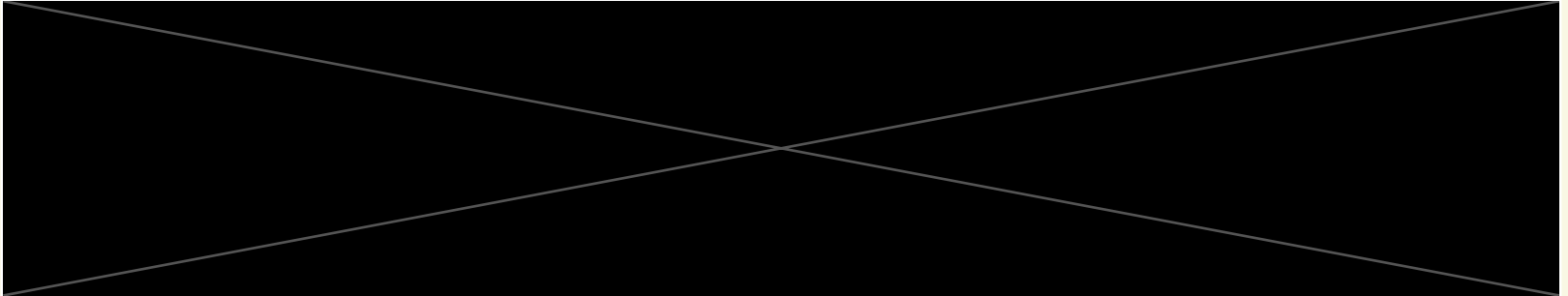
One of the passengers was a Frenchman, Pierre Mouton. His face was ash grey with agony at the aircraft’s up and down left and right behaviour. I decided to calm him down in French. The effect was magical. The twisted hands unfisted, the creases vanished from the forehead. He expressed surprise that “someone from this corner of India knew French.” Soon we got to talking and even before we landed at our destination, the pinkness had returned to his face.

Assam Calling

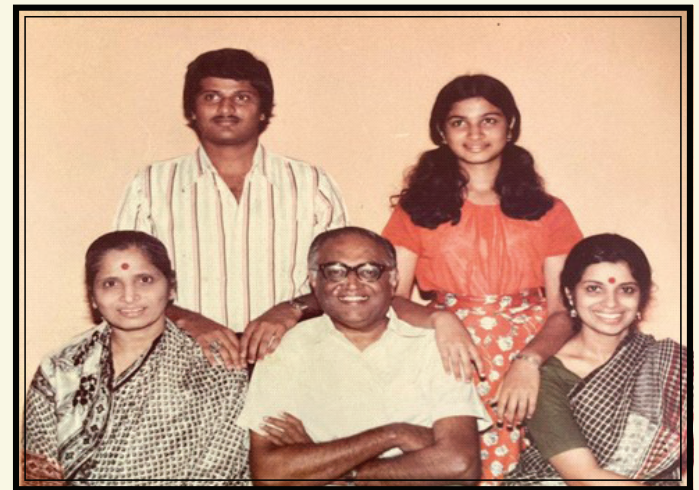
The Company car had brought sandwiches and tea and after sharing this with Pierre we set off for Digboi, 61 kms away. It was a pleasant road winding its way through neatly patterned tea gardens. An occasional tea factory interrupted the greenery. It was well into nightfall before I dropped off Pierre and staggered into Room 3 of the four bedroomed Bungalow 57. Just then the rains re-started.

A good omen.

Next morning, a delightful scene met my eyes. It was green grass again but spread as carpets over rolling countryside. A few trees enhanced the scenery while bungalows stood out like dollhouses. I could have stared in rapture but Y. Nagappa, Chief Palentologist of the Assam Oil Company (AOC) dragged me away to my future colleagues.



The last few years of my life...



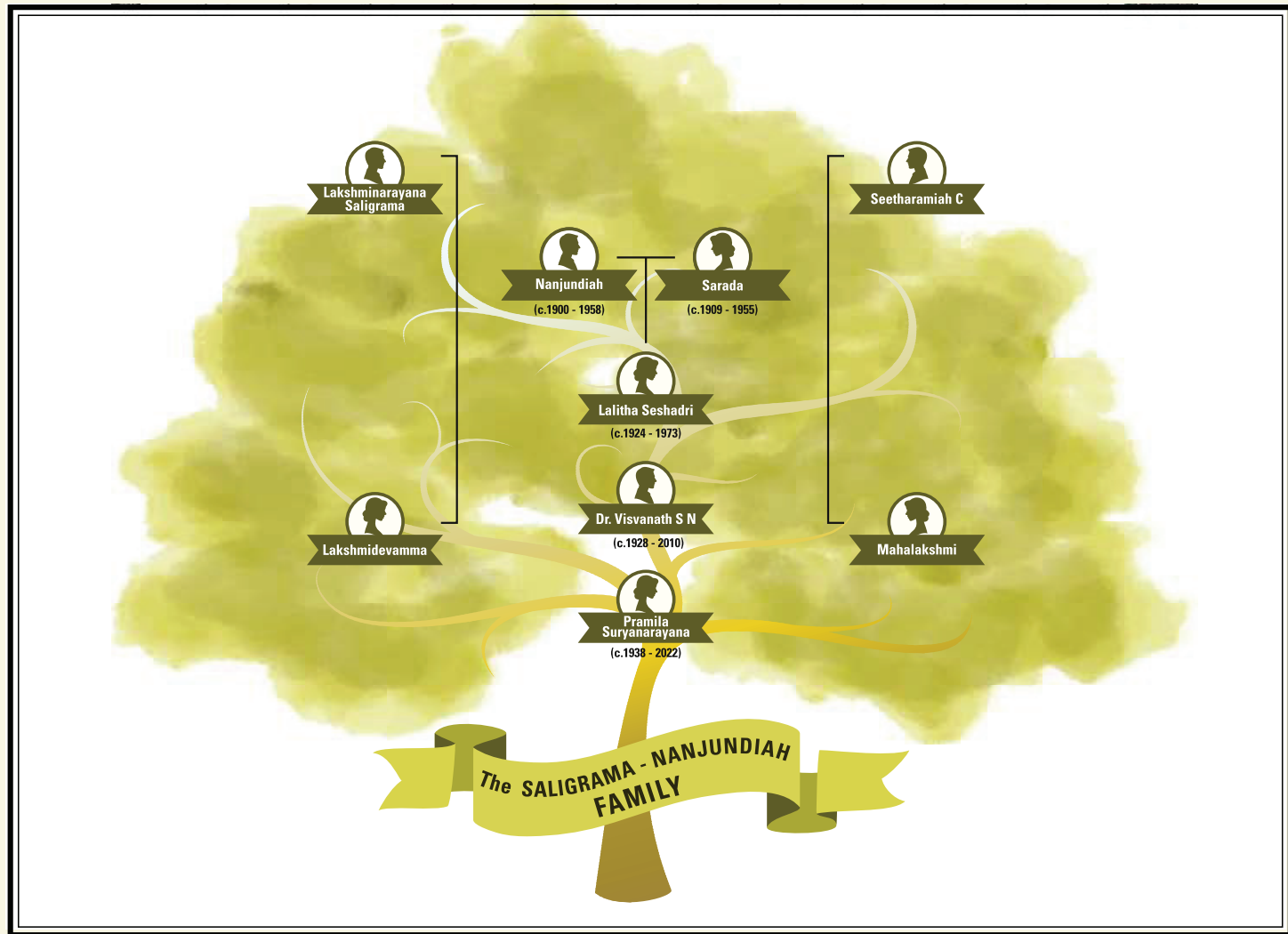
My Family

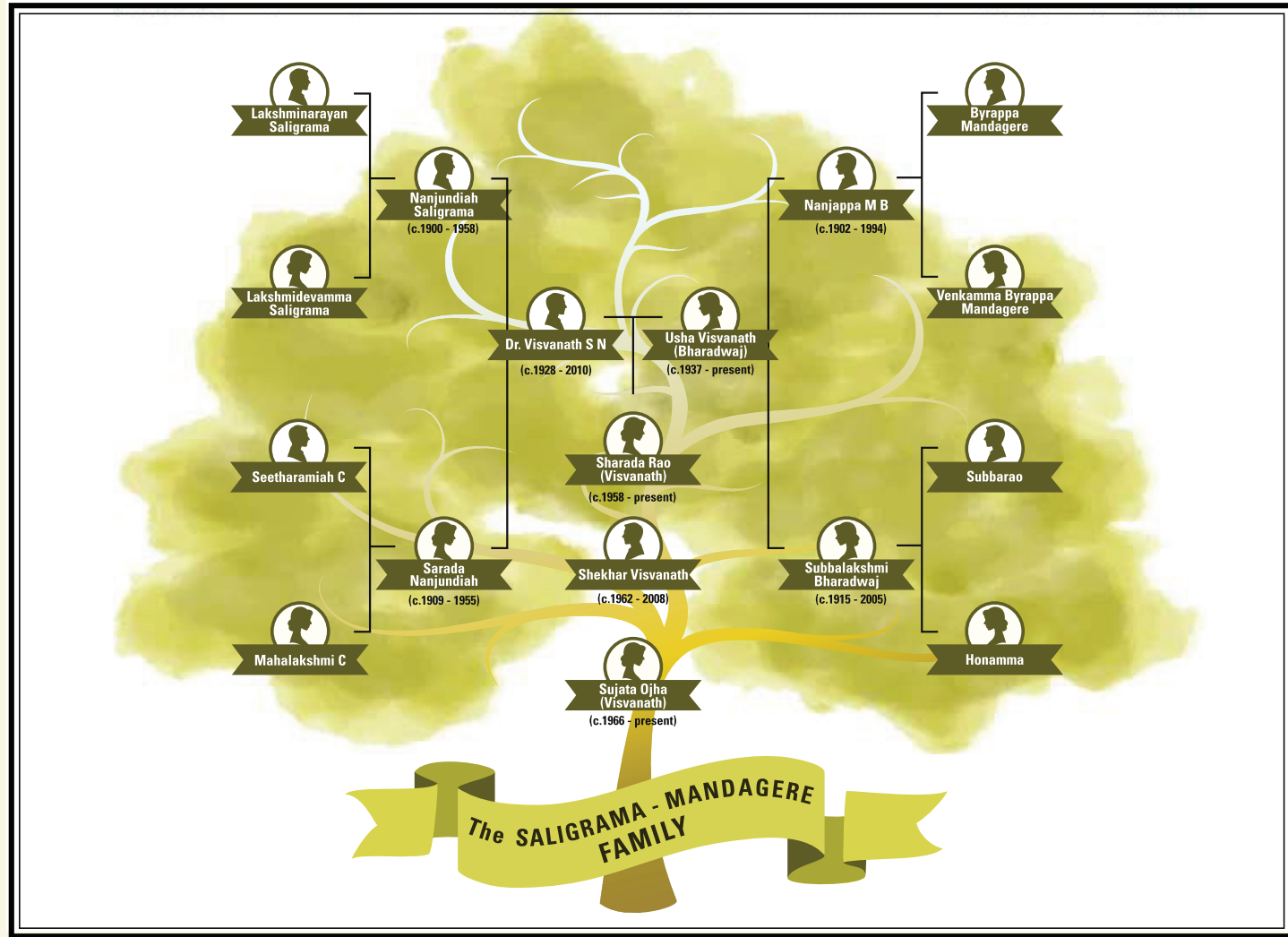
Epilogue: *His autobiography ends at the point when his career began in Digboi. Continuing his story is difficult because during his 30-year tenure (retired in 1986) in Assam we were mostly outside the state for studies etc. That he did a lot of good work would be an understatement, because even today he is respected and remembered. Annually, the Dr. S.N. Visvanath Memorial lectures are held in Duliajan; and in Dibrugarh University, a scholarship has been instituted in his name for a meritorious student of Geology pursuing his/her M.Sc.*

He was a prolific writer. Even after retirement he wrote five books. Perhaps he stopped writing this autobiography as the dialysis had weakened him and Shekhar's untimely demise had sapped his will to write and live. On 7-12-2010 he breathed his last. For us he was the World's Best father with a great sense of humour. Although he has titled his memoirs as "An Ordinary Life," he was an extraordinary person.



The grandchildren from left to right: Avinash, Dhruv, Rakhi, Dhananjay and Vikram





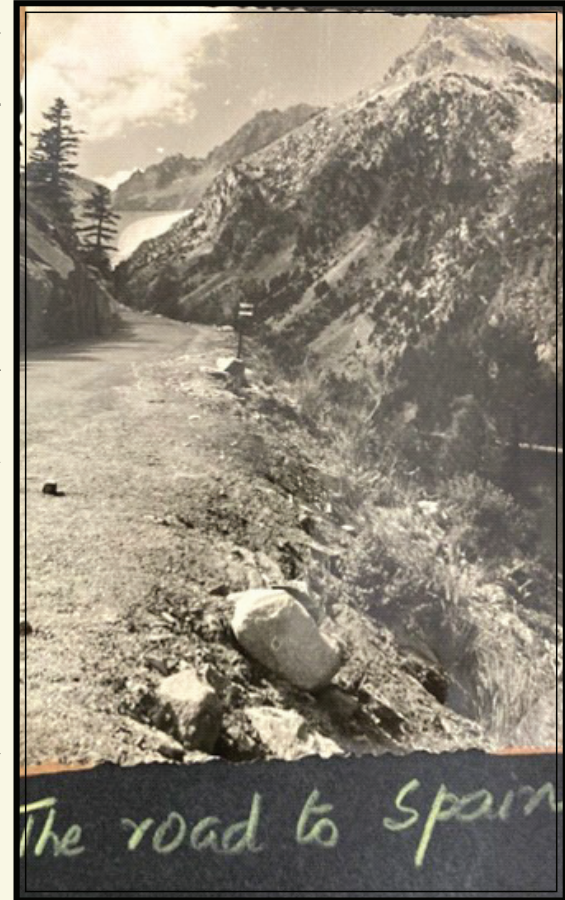
Appendices: Two articles written by esenvy (S.N. Visvanath)

PAIN IN SPAIN

This is a true story, although written by esenvy. Absolutely true. To those who believe, no explanation is necessary; to those who don't, no explanation is possible. The scene is set in the beautiful Pyrenees whose crest across 435 Km. defines the border between France and Spain. The Ariege province of France occupies 80 kms of the crest and extends down the valley of Lezto the city of Toulouse where the Airbus series of planes is being built today.

It was September 20th 1954 (much before 90 percent of today's Zalonians were born) and 5 of us who were trekking in the mountains decided to go across to Spain to see the fabulous gypsy dances of Viella, a few miles on the Spanish side. Although I used the word "us" I was adamantly against the idea. As French citizens those four could get across easily but I had to get a Spanish visa from Madrid. My friends had a good laugh and said the nights were dark and the sentries were drunk and the illegal migrants carrying illegal stuff had an easier time than the legal ones. I allowed myself to be hooked. It turned out to be the most dangerous decision of my life.

A sleepy sentry waved me in, and so here I was at the *passigere de Mauberge* facing the cold winds of the mountain pass. Running downhill for about ten kilometers was no great strain, firstly because of our youth and secondly we could see through the incredibly blue skies that the festivities had started. We walked into an atmosphere where the light-hearted music of *Espana Cara* soon gave way to the exuberant dance strains of the *flamenco*. Gypsy men and



women with the inevitable large earrings, purple and green attire, fans and special shoes and castanets danced to music of gay abandon. A few looked at me curiously, shook hands and spoke to me in French under the impression that I was an Algerian (who could enter freely as a French citizen).

And then terror struck. A hand descended on my right shoulder and I looked up to cold eyes and a grim mouth. "Your passport please" said the mouth and with trembling hands I handed him the certified true copy of my passport. "No visa to enter Spain" he announced. I nodded in assent. From nowhere, handcuffs appeared and locked me to the leg of an iron table while he walked away presumably to the boss. Never before in my life was I so frightened and lonely and depressed. At my suggestion my French friends kept away from me. After what seemed like 300 years, the sentry returned with a fat man who was obviously his superior. I like fat men. They can never stoop to anything low; they laugh at themselves; they smile at others.

Smilingly he informed me of three alternatives:

- Death by firing squad (virtually ruled out by the Committee since it was too strong a punishment for so small a crime).
- Work in the butchery in the kitchens of the General for ten years, which was worse than the firing squad to a south Indian Brahmin who was reluctant to kill a mosquito.
- Five years imprisonment.

I asked for some time, which was granted. This was just a delaying tactic because I was caught up in a whirlpool of emotions. Since I was a French government scholar, perhaps the Education Ministry would help. Even if they did, they would stop my scholarship and drive me out in disgrace. Perhaps suicide would be best but it was difficult and required ambience and guts. At this critical moment in my life, my saviour arrived.

He was a Catholic priest with the typical cap and beads. He walked straight to my chair but he did not say a word. Rather, there was a gun-fire conversation between the three of them, then back again, then away again. For some

reason, I felt that the fates were slowly turning in my favour. And so they were, with my imprisoned leg released. I then listened to a homily by the priest on why international territories must be respected, how I could have got a two-day visa for Spain at St. Giron's etc. He then asked me why an educated person like myself should indulge in trespass. I quoted from a French travel author who said that anyone who did not see Spain was only half educated. He had a good laugh. The tide was turning in my favour. In the Latin countries, the clergy wielded enormous power and could even intervene in government matters. If the arguments had continued for an hour more, I would have been elected Mayor of Viella.

And then he invited a shock for himself. Casually, he asked me to which part of Algiers, I belonged. When I told him I was an Indian from Bangalore, he almost collapsed. Recovering, he took a few deep breaths and said he spent 12 years in India, of which 8 years in Sholapur and 4 years in Bangalore. Over a bottle of wine we carried out a mental tourism of south India for an hour.

It was time for bed which meant a straw mattress, a soup obviously made in the fires of hell, and giant size sandwiches. The junior priest advised that cells numbers 143 and 149 were vacant on the odd-series side. My friend replied "Don't be silly. Give him any room on the even side." At that point of



The Fatherland

time, it was a funny subject for discussion on lodging for a man who had just got back from the precipice but, the reason became evident ten minutes later.

The windows of the odd number side overlooked a cordillera of uninteresting scenery while those on the even-numbered side overlooked the football field where the gypsy dances were in full swing. I got the message. I had come, though illegally, to see the dances and I, an Indian should not go away disappointed. And I got the best possible seat, on which I dozed off at around 3.a.m.

Two hours later I woke to the thunderous warming of a jeep. Dressing up was quick; it was the black coffee that burnt into the system. Anyway, we started off with the first sergeant who had leg-cuffed me, as a guardian lest I stray again. At the pass there were some further arguments, some papers were torn, and shaking of hands. At 06.19, I started running towards France and thus to liberty, equality and fraternity.

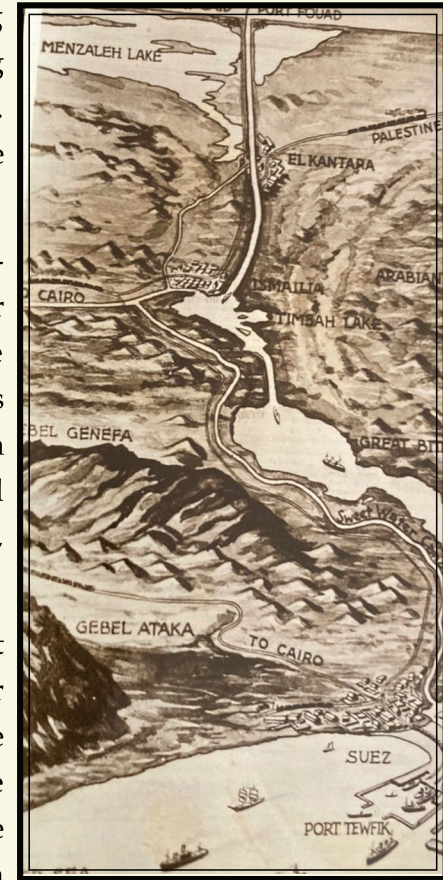
OUT AT SEA

Written on 28-05-07

Jimmy Midwoods "Passage to India" (BOS Newsletter April 2007) was excellent reading material on east-west sea voyages. It seamlessly weaves a historical narrative dating back to the beginning of the 19th century with his own impressions and experience. Stimulated by the article, I have been tempted to write in this last Newsletter of the BOS about the only sea voyage I undertook way back in the early 50s.

The year was 1952. The published route was Sydney - Saigon - Colombo - Aden - Port Said - Naples - Marseilles but I think Saigon was skipped due to deepening war crisis. The ship was the *Orcades* of *Messageries Maritimes*. The purpose of my voyage was higher studies in the School of Applied Geology in Nancy, Eastern France. I was to board it at Colombo but there was a three-day delay owing to some breakdown enroute. The delay was a blessing in disguise because at the agency's expense I could see some of the lovely spots: Kandy, Ratnapura, Adam's Peak of this pearl of the Orient, Ceylon.

We sailed out on 09 July 1952 heading south before taking a sharp turn northwest towards Aden. At the crossing of the Equator, first timers had to undergo a sea-water baptism, though fortunately not in the sea. Buckets of water did the job leaving one shivering in the mid-summer sun. Strangely enough, I did not have seasickness despite an angry Arabian Sea. Nor did my cabin-mate, Boris Ney. Unlike most Russians, he was a friendly genial type with whom I communicated in broken French. It was a glorious four days to Aden which we reached on July 16.



Route via the Suez Canal

We did not see many Yemenis on the waterfront of Aden but there were quite a few Gujarati shopkeepers. I do not remember whether Aden was a Crown Colony or Protectorate but that did not really matter as long as the rupee was valid and could fetch us a few trinkets.

The even tenor of life was disrupted in the next 48 hours. We had barely crossed into the Egyptian side of the Red Sea when news reached us that a coup d'état had taken place in Egypt, King Farouk had been dethroned and the country declared a Republic with General Nguib as its first President and Colonel Nasser as Premier. These developments may have helped Egypt but they ruined a carefully planned bus excursion for us by Thomas, Cook & Sons from Suez to the Pyramids and Cairo and back to the Orcades, which would be anchored at Port Said. Instead, we were confined to the ship at Suez. Both at Suez and Port Said, the midnight knock of which



Marseille Port, 1951

one had only read in the books of Alistair Maclean or Ian Fleming became a reality. There was much courtesy and apologies by the police for the disturbance, but the Republic had to be careful of possible traitors. We left Port Said 18 hours later across an incredibly blue Mediterranean Sea to reach Naples. The halt here enabled the passengers to see Pompeii, Vesuvius halfway up the hill and the Isle of Capri.

At Naples, Boris got off the ship. There was much hugging and tears and exchange of addresses. We both knew that the exchanges were pointless for if they were discovered by the henchmen of the Stalinist regime, he would disappear to Siberian mines and I would be stalked lest I have State secrets. The last lap of the voyage was made *magnifique* by the lights of the Cote d'azur, a sparkling necklace round the throat of France. And so we sailed into Marseilles. The onward journey was over.

Return Journey

After three years of study in France, the return journey began. The departure point was the beautiful town of Manton where the province of Alpes-Maritimes touched the Cote d'Azur. There was a small Customs building. People and cars and buses casually crossed each other with no inspection worth the name. With my cabin trunk and assorted luggage, I stood out like a sore thumb. I was summoned inside and politely asked to open the cabin trunk. Since I had some difficulty, I handed over all the keys. After struggling for a while, they gave up. They were apparently out of practice. Perhaps the last serious baggage check must have been of Hannibal and his 20 elephants who crossed the Alps into Italy about 2,300 years earlier. A Lloyd Triestino bus took me from Menton and delivered me to the safety of my ship at Genoa.

Apart from the excitement of returning home, the sights and sounds were all too familiar to provoke admiration. One incident, however, remains engraved in my mind. On-board entertainment on the first night was Melodies and Dances of Greece. I was allotted a table which both in its placement and decoration appeared too good for me but my nameplate was there and I relaxed. About ten minutes later an agitated official appeared at the table with all the handwringing, rolling eyes, and repeated apologies of which only the Latin races are capable. He explained that a catastrophe had



On the Ship

happened. I was on the right ship in the right cabin but the wrong table had been allotted to me. Could I move over to my real table 5 metres away so that Mr. Appleton could occupy *his* real table? I could and I did. Mr. and Mrs. Appleton rewarded me with a smile and thanks while the official almost fell at my feet in gratitude. The next day while reading an Agatha Christie thriller, Mr and Mrs. Appleton parked themselves on deck chairs close to mine and we talked in an easy manner on various subjects. It was only later in the afternoon that I learnt that I had been talking to one of the world's greatest physicists, Sir Edward Appleton, whose

discovery of the most important layer to reflect radio waves in the ionosphere (since named the Appleton Layer) opened the gates to mass communication. His was a career marked by brilliant research, lectures, and awards culminating in the Nobel Prize for physics in 1947. He was now heading for a science congress at Karachi.

Shocked by this discovery, I sat down to recollect if I had said anything out-of-place or tactless. Apparently, I hadn't since I met the same hail-fellow-well-met treatment, but my conversation was subdued. With that intuition of which only women seem to be capable of, Lady Appleton asked me if I was feeling unwell. This opened the floodgates, and I blurted out my agony and ecstasy. Sir Edward was highly amused, particularly when I reminded him that beneath his ionosphere we were on the Ionian Sea, west of Greece.

At Karachi, the Appletons were whisked away by a hi-fi delegation of scientists while I joined the tourists to the grave of Md. Ali Jinnah, the father-founder of Pakistan Back to the ship, we set sail to Bombay where we arrived the next day.

My odyssey was over.

Memories have faded with time but there was one vivid throwback to the onward journey in July 1992. This was the picture of Boris Nikolaitovich Yeltsin taking over as the first democratically elected President of Russia. Was this my friend Boris? I was tempted to write to him but both in India and Russia economic convulsions were taking place with subtle forces at work and I might end up accused as a Russian agent. I kept my distance and silence but for some mysterious reason I felt very sad when he died in February this year.

When an autobiography evolves into a biography there is a whole new dimension added. The prologue began on a despondent note, perhaps that was because of Shekhar's untimely death and his own failing health. In fact it was more like a diary that our mother shared with us after his demise. After reading the first few pages we kept it aside as it was very depressing. Then when we were compiling our mother's memoirs, we thought of doing something similar for him. Our starting point was where his had ended. He saw the lows and we saw the highs. While he felt he was ordinary and his life was unexceptional; we knew he was a super achiever and excelled in every sphere. He's no longer amidst us, but his kindness, sense of humour and values he instilled in us, continue to illuminate our lives.

Quoting his favourite stanza:

"I chatter, chatter, as I flow

To join the brimming river,

For men may come and men may go,

But I go on forever."



